

# TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

**Micaela Maftai, *The Fiction of Autobiography: Reading and Writing Identity* (Bloomsbury, 2013)**

Micaela Maftai discusses issues of memory, truth(s), multiplicity of narrative voice, and uncertainty in her perhaps provocatively titled book, *The Fiction of Autobiography: Reading and Writing Identity*. Her primary concern is writing truthfully in autobiography, but she argues that truth and facts are not necessarily the same thing.

The book is structured in four chapters with an appendix of Maftai's own autobiographical stories. In the first chapter she discusses truth; the second 'dismisses' unity and argues for a multiplicity of voices in autobiographical writing; the third deals with memory; and in the fourth she posits that autobiography is a 'new product' (4) created from memory, not a direct transcript fixed in time. The autobiographical stories, which I found to be well written and engaging, were a 'launch pad for research and critical writing' (11). Using these she has created a 'story of the stories' (9).

In her introduction, Maftai delves further into these aims for her book. She wants to 'explore the development of a way of thinking about and around autobiography and memoir that has three primary focuses' (9). She really sets out to unravel old preconceptions of what autobiography actually is: it is not a succession of facts about a person's life that is set in concrete; the protagonist or subject of the autobiography is not the same person as the writer of the text, and, in fact, both change through time and with each writing out of the memory; memory is a process, as is autobiographical storytelling, and each instance of the latter is a 'new, creative construction' that has 'a strong link to past events' but is 'not bound by' them (9).

I would like to have seen more discussion of Maftai's own autobiographical writing, rather than it being relegated to the end of the book and only mentioned briefly. To integrate her own writing into the discussion would have made this especially interesting for those readers who write autobiography themselves.

In Chapter One, 'Truth and Trust', Maftai brings in discussions of William Zinsser's collection *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir* (1998), and the viewpoints of various contributors. Zinsser's title alone 'complicates the categories of invention and truth by binding them' (23) and making them both apply to the writing of memoir. Maftai argues against the idea of authorial intention as the basis for autobiographical truth, as she feels that not even the author may know his or her own intentions, let alone the reader (25).

In this chapter, autobiography as testimony and a means of surviving trauma is discussed, referring extensively to the writers Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (mistakenly referred to throughout as Lori Daub) and their significant work *Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1992), as well as John Beverley's *Testimonio: On the Politics of Truth* (2004). Felman and Laub also treat autobiography as a 'form of reconstruction', particularly with respect to trauma, which they posit is not something just 'remembered' or 'confessed' (31). Beverley talks of testimonio as particular to Latin American social justice autobiographies, texts that bind the personal and the sociopolitical, and which are a 'way of integrating an individual's story into a larger narrative of social injustice or violence' (33).

Jill Ker Conway also asserts that there is no single truth in autobiography, that we write *a* truth rather than *the* truth (41). A number of fiction writers' views on truth are also discussed, such as Toni Morrison, Virginia Woolf and Haruki Murakami. Maftai summarises her argument here with the following: 'The line between truth and fiction is not clear, or maybe there is no line, or maybe sometimes you can see the line and sometimes you cannot' (42). It made me think of the difference between a camera recording of an event, and human memory; the former is the same every time it is

Book reviews: *The Fiction of Autobiography: Reading and Writing Identity* by Micaela Maftai. Sue Bond. Transnational Literature Vol. 7 no. 1, November 2014.  
<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

played, while the latter changes every time the event is recalled, according to all the factors that influence memory, not the least being that 'story, in its telling, changes the memory' (43).

Maftei includes a discussion of the important French theorist of autobiography, Philippe Lejeune, whose significant essay 'The Autobiographical Pact' (1975) included the definition of autobiography and, as Maftei notes, an important distinction between autobiography and the novel. This creates problems, with the necessity for there to be authorial intention for the work to be autobiography rather than fiction otherwise the reader cannot tell the difference. Later, Lejeune revised his views, and noted that the reader brings his or her reading to the text, which is, of course, out of the control of the author: 'The public is not homogenous' (qtd 52).

In her second chapter, 'Me and Not-Me: Dismissing Unity in Autobiographical Writing', Maftei extends her thoughts on the fluid aspects of autobiography with a discussion of the multiplicity of voices inherent in such texts. She refers to Paul John Eakin's ideas of 'living narratively' – constructing our lives by constructing narratives about our lives (62) – and the importance of language in communicating inner experience. She discusses several writers' autobiographies and memoirs to engage with these points, including Roland Barthes, Joan Didion and Gertrude Stein. In the latter she shows how Stein actually problematises Lejeune's pact because the identity between the author, narrator and protagonist is deliberately confused, and the book is an 'extreme example of creating a persona' (81).

Maftei addresses memory and its presence in memoir in the third chapter with reference to Vladimir Nabokov's *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* (2000) and Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005). Memory is not a fixed object but a tool to create autobiographical text; it is something that the brain can *do* rather than find, according to Israel Rosenfield (96). Maftei uses Rosenfield's work to argue that 'memory can be seen as a process of constant reconstruction performed by the brain' (97) and therefore is 'one more source of fiction', making autobiographies special fictions based on memory rather than purely imagination. She makes a distinction here between lies and inventions; autobiographical work is not exemplified by James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces* (2003), where he exaggerated the truth to make the work more sensational, for example. I see her arguing that an autobiography is not a final telling of one person's story garnered from an infallible, fixed memory, but instead a version of one person's experience which inevitably involves other people and which will vary with each telling because of the nature of memory.

In her last chapter, Maftei builds on this argument. She quotes John Sturrock's ideas about autobiography as a 'process of conversion' but prefers to use the term construction, as it reflects the newness of the writing and structure of the book produced (135). The brain is, according to Martin Conway, more concerned with 'making sense of things than it is in representing them accurately' (qtd 141), so memory reflects this process, and our narratives are 'embroidered with imagination' (146–47).

Micaela Maftei's exploration of autobiography is stimulating, well written and argued, and an extremely useful addition to the field of life writing studies, particularly with respect to memory and our contemporary understanding of how it works.

**Sue Bond**